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ABSTRACT

This article describes one teacher's methods of role-playing for helping students in the foreign language classroom advance to higher level skills. Role-playing is a closed book, cooperative learning technique in which the student has an opportunity to use the language in a non-threatening, spontaneous response environment. Role-playing is an advantage for the instructor as well as it offers a way to check unofficially on student pronunciation and learning, encourages cultural awareness, and practices comprehension as well as communication production. This teacher's particular method teaches theory and vocabulary throughout most of the school year, reserving the last few months for role-playing, mini-conversational practice. All students must participate in the role-playing activity. Four types of role-playing activities are used: basic, expanded, teacher-generated, and student-generated. It is suggested that assessment of the student's role-playing not be by the alphabet grading method, but rather by a 4-part method that includes teacher observation, a system of checks, a 1-5 number rating system, or part of a portfolio assessment package. Students have found this method enjoyable and profitable. (NAV)

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Donald E. Witt

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Role-Playing Strategies for Instruction and Assessment

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Foreign language teachers desire to keep their students on task for as much class time as possible, actively involved in using the foreign language in both oral and written exercises. As educators, we know that the more students participate in the learning process, the more they learn. And the more our students use the foreign language, the more they retain and improve their language skills.

In general, students want to participate in class activities; otherwise, boredom occurs. They like to use the foreign language as this gives them a sense of accomplishment and a chance to "perform" using their newly acquired skills. But with most students, their interest levels and attention spans vary, and they have a variety of learning skills. Thus I work continually on strategies and approaches that help maintain the interest level of my students while balancing the time spent reinforcing the "old material" and introducing the new material. Repetition leads to comments such as "We've already done that," "Again?" and "I already know that." The students do not understand that repetition reinforces, though they may spend hours learning a skill for an extra-curricular activity (pitching, shooting baskets, playing a musical instrument). Students do not make connections; they view class work differently.

Therefore I use a variety of activities in which I mix the new material with that previously learned. These activities include the "standards" such as dialogue practice, oral reading, dictation, vocabulary drill, workbook exercises, oral text exercises, games, and crossword puzzles. I prefer to use as many activities per class as possible, with each activity lasting about ten minutes. The number and types used depend on the material that needs to be covered; each day is different. Successful fusion of activities results in a fast-paced class with goals accomplished and expectations met.

The above scenario works well to teach, practice, and reinforce the basics. But to advance to higher level skills, another approach is needed, and I find role playing offers various opportunities for practicing thinking skills.

Defining the activity

Role playing is

- a closed-book activity
- a cooperative learning technique
- a usage based activity that requires student involvement
- an occasion to use the language in a non-threatening environment
- a spontaneous response to a situation using only known material (as spontaneous as the classroom setting allows)

Role playing is not an activity where students present a prepared skit or dialogue, nor is it a method to learn new material.

Through role playing, I can

- hear a student's pronunciation and inflection
- verify whether a student has grasped the idea or concept presented and practiced in class
- listen to a student's use of vocabulary
- assess a student's skill in using the language (strengths and weaknesses)

Also, role playing

- provides an opportunity to practice cultural differences, i.e., shaking hands and addressing people
- allows students to hear one another (comprehension in a controlled setting)
- helps students communicate since they must generate speech in a conversation.

One can use role playing

- at the beginning of class as a warm-up activity, as a vocabulary review, or as a motivating tool
- at the end of class as a closing activity that incorporates the material learned that class period
- at the end of a chapter or a unit
- at any appropriate time in your schedule

When and how often one makes this activity a part of the curriculum depends on individual schedules and circumstances.

Procedures and preparations

I prefer to divide the school year into two parts, not necessarily of equal length. I devote the first part to learning the material in the text, advancing as rapidly as possible. (One practices the process of elimination.) I control the time used for role playing and limit the situations to those ideas and dialogues found in the text. Thus the activity is used for reinforcing basic textual material.

I teach part two of the course during the last two or three months of the school year. The focus changes to a mini-conversational type of curriculum with an emphasis on using the foreign language in "real-life" tourist situations (i.e., ordering food, getting a hotel room, asking directions, buying products, and exchanging money). These topics allow the students to use longer and more complex role-playing situations as they develop and expand their foreign language capabilities.

All students participate in role-playing situations. This is not a "watch-other-student" activity. At the beginning of each nine weeks, I have students pick in turn role-playing partners (i.e., partner #1, partner #2), until each student has chosen four or five different partners. I do one number at

a time and make certain that each student has a partner before going to the next number. (If a class has an odd number of students, then one group will have three students.) During the role-playing exercise, each group of two students converses. If larger groups are needed, I combine groups or repeat the selection process.

To begin, I demonstrate the role-playing activity, if needed. Otherwise directions are given, such as working with partner number (you choose), order lunch (sandwich, beverage, and dessert). One student plays the waiter; the other, the client. Then I have students reverse the roles. Each student should have the opportunity to play each role. If additional practice is needed, I ask students to change partners and order breakfast, for example.

During the activity I move around the room listening to the conversations, helping if a student is lost or not speaking correctly. Also, moving from one group to another encourages the students to stay on task the entire time and allows me to monitor the progress of my students. I set and enforce time limitations—students react faster. Once the students overcome their hesitations, they enjoy the activity and look forward to participating in an "assignment" that enhances their oral and thinking skills.

I should add that, beginning the first week of school, my students do a considerable number of their assignments (text and workbook) using cooperative learning in which they work with two or three partners. This approach helps students overcome their hesitancies about working with one another, and, during that time, I can give individual help where needed. Also this method of learning prepares students for their later role-playing activities.

Goal of role playing

The goal of role playing is comprehension and communication. Can students express themselves in the foreign language? For example, can the student ask a question and be understood, get and understand a reply, and give an appropriate response if necessary? Since the students are trying to communicate and comprehend, not every word will be pronounced correctly nor will the grammar be one hundred percent correct. The conversation cannot be interrupted each time a student makes a mistake. Depending upon the severity of the error, I take notes and make comments about the presentations to the class or to the individuals after the students finish. During the exercise, I listen for such items as vocabulary use, subject-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, negative and interrogative constructions, and any other point I wish the students to practice. For example, in the question "à quelle heure?" I would listen for an "à" in the response. Since it is impossible to hear every word or phrase in each conversation, I must be selective (different choices each time) and focus on one or two items. This way I can gauge my students' progress and determine their levels of comprehension and their skills in using the foreign language.

Types of role-playing activities

There are four types of role-playing activities: basic, expanded, teacher-generated, and student-generated. During the first part of the school year, I only use those activities that can be done rapidly and efficiently, i.e., basic, expanded, and teacher-generated when the students are prepared. The fourth activity is generally reserved for the latter part of the academic year where the emphasis is on conversation and proper use. Thus this activity becomes part of the class format that involves the processes of thinking, speaking, and reasoning.

Basic. The first type of role-playing activity is used after students have learned vocabulary and fundamental expressions of conversation. Since these mini-conversations involve one topic and one idea, they are the least complicated and the least involved. The subject reflects recently learned material, and students perform the exercises quickly and without much hesitation. For example, a student

- orders a sandwich and a beverage in a cafe
- buys a baguette and a croissant in a bakery
- buys a pencil and some paper in a store.

The students would use terms such as "je voudrais, madame, mademoiselle, monsieur, merci, un, une, des," and any additional expressions related to the exercise. This activity does not expand student vocabulary; it reinforces material learned.

Expanded. To practice two or more topics in a structured setting, I use an expanded role-playing activity. More complicated than basic, this exercise requires students to use higher level thinking skills and build on material already practice. For example, after the students learn the numbers, I add an additional activity to the basic role-playing model. Now when the students order or buy, they must pay and get change. (We use francs and centimes that the students have made.) Beyond ordering and handling "money," students count, begin to understand the French monetary system, and expand their vocabulary skills.

Teacher-generated. After students become comfortable with the first two types of role-playing activities, I advance to the next level of difficulty—the teacher-generated scenario. Still building and expanding, the student confronts an unexpected situation and must react accordingly. For example, at the caf_ the waiter

- brings the wrong dish
- tells the student that the item on the menu is not available
- brings incorrect change or makes an error on the bill.

Now the student needs to react and could

- decide whether to order another dish
- ask for a menu or ask the waiter what is available
- call the waiter's attention to the error on the bill or to the incorrect change.

The students make the decisions, and in doing so, their conversations become more spontaneous since they have no advance knowledge of what is going to happen.

Sometimes I give a specific amount of money to the students for expenses. The students must stay within their limits when ordering or buying. If they need additional funds, they can borrow some money from other students, provided they conduct the transactions in the foreign language. Again, the activity calls for some ingenuity from the students, with often pleasant surprises as the results.

The teacher-generated activity requires more time and conversational ability than the previous one. Since the students have a limited vocabulary, their conversations might sound stilted. Even so, I do not allow students to use a dictionary to find a new word or expression. To do so would take away the spontaneity of the exercise since, in normal conversations, students do not stop to search for words in the dictionary.

Student-generated. Student-generated role playing is best used during the latter half of the school year, after the students have learned to function in the foreign language (for the appropriate level). Since students often waste time making decisions and to avoid the "what will we do" type questions, I choose the general topic with suggested guidelines. Topics always include material, in some form, practiced in earlier role-playing activities. For example, the students

- make plans to meet after school, i.e., where, when, and how to get there
- decide how to get from point A to point B in Paris, i.e., method of transportation, transfers, cost, and what to see along the way
- plan a party, i.e., when, whom to invite, what each to bring, time, and place.

This activity works well in helping students obtain a "feel" for the language and helps them eliminate the need to translate every word or phrase. Since this dialogue is a feature of the mini-conversation course (last two or three months of the school year), the no-English rule applies. The students must use the foreign language, and once they discover they can do it, the role-playing scenarios become an accepted part of the course requirements.

Assessment

The focus of role-playing activities is communication, and any assessment must take into account the student's ability to speak and comprehend the foreign language. Thus a traditional A- B- C- type grade might not be the best. I use four methods of assessment, depending on the exercise.

The first, no assessment and no grade for the activity, is used primarily during basic role-playing situations and during first-time efforts of the other types. I walk around the class, monitor the students, and help and reassure them when needed. This encourages student participation by eliminating the fear or the anxiety of having to do it correctly.

A second way to assess students utilizes a system of checks. As I walk around the room, I put a mark after the student's name—a check-plus for exceptional work, a check for during the work well, and a check-minus if the student does the work with limited skill. At the end of the grading period, I convert these checks to letter grades using a percentage format which become part of the course grade.

A third method of evaluation, similar to the second, uses numbers ranging from zero to five (five is best) instead of checks. I prefer this method because I have more categories to use and can tabulate the results more easily.

Finally, one might consider making the role-playing activities part of a portfolio assessment package. A card noting completed activities with dates and degree of communicative skills works well.

Whatever method or methods one chooses, consistency is the key; otherwise no standard format exists.

In conclusion, students find role playing an enjoyable and profitable activity. They enjoy learning when busily involved in activities beyond the text and workbook. They profit from the realization that they can communicate in the foreign language and experience the results of their time spent studying.

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